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AUTHOR Klein-Andreu, Flora
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ABSTRACT

A study of children's egocentrism in their use of person and case examined whether 7-year-olds would tend to cast themselves as subjects in sentences using the verbs "give, show, say, tell, and lend," and what role they might assign the hearer. In 85 utterances, the children (N=17), with an average age of 7.8 years, showed the expected tendency toward self-mention, with 93 direct references to self as verb arguments. Of the 42 verb arguments not related to the self, 38 percent were explicitly related to ego (e.g., my house, my mother). These findings suggest that the child's world is centered on himself first, and secondly on persons related to the child or things belonging to him or her. Examination of dative and accusative case usage found that the self never appeared as accusative and no accusative was animate, but of the accusatives and prepositional verb modifiers, almost a quarter were explicitly related to ego. Few references were made to the hearer. However, a significant sex difference in preferred case-role for ego emerged: boys tended to refer to themselves as subjects more often than as datives, while girls referred to themselves more frequently as datives than subjects. Gender preference was also found in mention of peers. Nine figures are included. (MSE)

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Who does what to whom: Person and case in children's utterances

Flora Klein-Andreu

S.U.N.Y. at Stony Brook

Paper presented at the Annual meeting of the

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Introduction. Recent literature on case often mentions a tendency toward "egocentricity", whose effect is to make the speaker the preferred subject of his or her own utterances (e.g. Givon 1976, Zubin 1979), and even the "default" interpretation for unmarked subjects (Friedman 1976). However, there has not been much research on the relation of person and case in actual usage, and the results of what studies there are do not not necessarily support each other. For example, Guy and Allen's 1976 study of conversations in an experimental setting did find that the preferred referent of pronouns was the self, followed by the hearer, and also that the preferred role for the self was that of subject (Guy and Allen 1976). And the same tendency is corroborated in written language in Zubin's counts from literary works: They show the speaker as the most frequent subject, the next most frequent being entities resembling the speaker--other humans, and especially the hearer. Finally, my own investigation of "ungrammatical" subjects in Spanish conversation (Klein-Andreu In press (a) and (b)) shows them to be overwhelmingly self-referent.

On the other hand, the results of Anna Wierzbicka's investigation of the relation of person and case in plays and written narratives seem to contradict these findings. Wierzbicka counted transitive action sentences in which both agent and patient are human, and found that the ratio of mentions as agent to mentions as patient was lower for 1st persons than it was for non-1st persons (Wierzbicka 1981:46).

A Preliminary Study of Utterances Elicited from Children. As a preliminary source of data possibly relevant to this question I decided to gather some first reactions from children. For each of five verbs that suggest three arguments--give, show, say, tell, and lend (or loan)--each child was asked, individually and alone "can you think of something to say with this word in it", after which the particular verb was given orally. I was interested in seeing whether they would tend to cast themselves as subject, as "egocentricity" would predict, and also what role, if any, they would assign to the hearer. In order to avoid as much as possible prejudicing against 3d person singular responses, each verb was given both in the unmarked present form and in the past (for example, give or gave were presented as equivalent options). Seventeen children were queried, mostly by me but in a few cases by another female investigator. Their average age was 7.8 years (that is, about 7 years and 9 months). They included 11 boys and 6 girls.

Results. The result was a total of 85 utterances, of which 14 were complex. As Figure 1 shows, the children showed the expected tendency to self-mention, with 93 direct references to self (I or me) as arguments of the verb. This amounts to 69% of a total of 135 verb arguments. Also, of 42 verb arguments that are not the self, 16 (or 38%) are explicitly related to ego, by a possessive (e.g. my house, my mother). Thus the children's reactions can be said to portray a world centered around

themselves, and consisting in the first place of themselves and then of persons related to them and of things belonging to them.

Overall, the preferred subject is also the self, as Figure 2 shows, accounting for 61 (59%) of a total 103 subjects. As Figure 3 shows, preference for the self is stronger if one counts only the expressed subjects of main clauses and 1st coordinate clauses, accounting for 52 (66%) of a total 79.

Returning to Figure 2, we see that of a total 69 Datives, 26 (37%) are ego. The self never figures as Accusative, and in fact no Accusative is animate. However, of 73 Accusatives and prepositional modifiers of the verb (e.g. told about x), 16 (22%) are in some way explicitly related to ego, either exclusively (my x) or inclusively (our x).

On the other hand Figure 4 shows that there are few references to the hearer, as compared to other non-ego referents. Not surprisingly, they were mostly made by children who interacted habitually with the interviewer, in that she was a frequent visitor in their home or, in a few cases, their own mother. The hearer appears as subject explicitly only twice, and 6 times as the implicit subject of an imperative, whereas 35 subjects are 3d person. The hearer is Dative 13 times, as compared to 34 3d person Datives.

A more unexpected finding, however, is a significant difference in the preferred case-role for ego as a function of the sex of the respondent, as shown in Figure 5. For the boys, 49 out of 60 self-references (82%) are Subjects, while 11 (18%) are Datives. But the girl's responses tend to skew in the opposite direction, with 12 (44%) of a total 27 self-references being subjects, while 15 (56%) are Datives. As Figure 6 shows, this difference between the groups is significant by X2, with a probability of chance occurrence of less than 1 in a hundred. This is also true if one counts only actually expressed subjects of main and 1st coordinate clauses. We then have a total of 52 self-mentions by the boys, with 42 (81%) being as subject and 10 as Dative, compared to a total 24 self-mentions by the girls, of which 10 (42%) are as subject and 14 are as Dative.

These findings may also be viewed in terms of the preferred person-reference for the subject vs. the Dative roles. As Figure 7 shows, for the boys 49 out of a total 69 subjects (71%) are ego, as compared to 11 (25%) of a total 44 Datives. For the girls, 12 of a total 34 subjects (35%) are ego, as compared to 15 (60%) of a total 25 Datives.

Moreover, the children's choice of subject is also skewed as a function of the speakers' sex when the subject is 3d person. If we exclude references to "authority figures" such as mother, teacher, or parents and consider only (possible) references to age-peers, we find that they are more likely to be of the same

gender as the speaker when the speaker is a boy than they are when the speaker is a girl. As Figure 8 shows, both the boys and the girls produced 5 subjects whose referents could be self-equivalent, in the sense that they could refer to a person of both the same age and the same sex as the speaker. Examples are, for male speakers, he, a boy, a boys name, or even my friend; and for female speakers, she, a girl, a girl's name, or my friend. It is noteworthy that the boys gave only one subject which had to be a peer of the opposite sex, whereas the girls gave 9 such subjects--that is, almost twice as many as they did of possible peers of the same sex, and almost as many as they did of ego-subjects .

Discussion. There are many ways of viewing these findings, which do not necessarily exclude each other--among other things because, in our examples, subject coincides with 'agent'. On the one hand, they support Frank and Anshen's (1983) contention that boys are more likely than girls to express self-centeredness. But they also support the view that both sexes regard typical agents (or appropriate topics) as being male. This is consonant with the findings of Garcia (1975) and Garcia and Otheguy (1977) with respect to non-subject referents: In responses to questionnaires, they found that male referents tended to be assigned a relatively 'more active' case-role than female referents (Dative, as compared to Accusative), in identical linguistic contexts.

As for the data presented here, they are too limited to allow further analysis. They do suggest, however, that the question of

ego-centricity--as indicated in discourse, first, by frequency of reference overall, and secondly by frequency of reference in relatively topical/active roles--seems to be complicated by a number of factors that need to be taken into account. At the very least, it seems necessary to consider who is talking (in the case of speech) and/or supposed to be talking (in the case of written language). It also seems necessary to consider who the hearer is, and his or her relationship to the speaker, and finally even broader cultural characteristics that might affect speakers' views of the kind of "speech event" involved, and the appropriate roles in it for referents of various kinds, including the self and the interlocutors (cf. Klein-Andreu, In press (a) and (b)). Finally, inasmuch as such considerations may also be expected to affect the expectations of the hearer (reader), they should also be expected to influence the interpretation of language (as is suggested by the observations in Friedman 1976). Accordingly, they should also be taken into account in studies of interpretation--such as the numerous studies of the interpretation of reflexives.

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Flora Klein-Andreu
SUNY at Stony Brook

Figure 1

Proportion of self-references to total arguments in childrens' utterances

Verb Arguments	Self-references	% self -references
135	93	69%

Figure 2

Self-reference as a function of case-role

	Total N	= self	% = self
Subjects	103	61	59%
Datives	69	26	37%

Figure 3

Proportion of self-reference in subjects of main clauses and 1st coordinate clauses

Total expressed subjects of main clauses and first coordinate clauses	Subject = self	% Subjects = self
79	52	66%

Figure 4

References to persons other than self as a function of case

	Hearer	3p
Subject	2 (explicit) 6 (implied)	35
Dative	13	34

Figure 5

Case-role of self, as a function of speakers' sex

	Total = self	Subject	%	Dative	%
Boys	60	49	(82%)	11	(18%)
Girls	27	12	(44%)	15	(56%)

($p. =< .001$)

Figure 6

Case-role of self as a function of speakers' sex (with subjects= expressed subjects of main clause or of 1st coordinate)

	Expressed main or 1st coordinate subjects	All Datives
Boys	42	10
Girls	10	14

(p=<.001)

Figure 7

Self-reference as a function of case-role and of the sex of the speakers

	N subjects	= self N	%	N Datives	= self N	%
Boys	69	49	71%	44	11	25%
Girls	34	12	35%	25	15	60%

Figure 8

Frequency of same sex vs. different sex age-peers as subjects, as a function of the sex of the speakers

	N 'boy' subjects	N 'girl' subjects
Boys	5	1
Girls	9	5

Figure 9

Reference to "authority figures" and (possible) age-peers of same and of different gender as the speaker, as a function of the referents' case-role and of the speakers' sex

	SUBJECTS			DATIVES		
	Authority Figures	Age-peers = gender	Age-peers # gender	Authority Figures	Age-peers = gender	Age-peers # gender
Boys	5	5	1	11	4	4
Girls	6	5	9	2	1	1